

19 September 1979

TO: SRP

SUBJECT: Reactions to the Ellsworth/Adelman article in
Foreign Policy

1. The rebuttals are well taken.
2. If one adds periods of overestimates and underestimates, roughly correct estimates are rare. This does not disturb me because the job is intrinsically very difficult.
3. But the intrinsic difficulty of the job should produce a random sequence of overestimates and underestimates. In fact, we have had the one or the other consistently over long periods of time: gross overestimates in the late 1950s and early 1960s; gross underestimates during the rest of the 1960s; and, although the record for the 1970s is more mixed regarding particulars, underestimates regarding future Soviet strike capability remained fairly consistent.
4. I find this persistence of bias somewhat disturbing even after having read the rebuttals. Such persistence can only be explained by the operation of analytical assumptions that are taken to the data. The rebuttal material admits this. Recent underestimates were apparently driven by the belief that the Soviets would not want to exceed numbers of ICBMs deployed by the US in order not to stimulate new US programs or to reap political and psychological advantages (the nature of which is not specified). The papers by [redacted] also state that the early underestimates after a long series of overestimates may have resulted from a subconscious over-reaction to the charge of having grossly overestimated Soviet ICBM expansion for a number of years. If such subconscious predispositions prevailed, they led presumably to the choice of assumptions about Soviet behavior that favored underestimates.

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5. [] also makes the interesting observation that the less information we had (as in late 1950s and early 1960s), the more we overestimated in response to uncertainty, while the more information we had (as in the late 1960s and early 1970s), the more we underestimated. [] does not explain this tendency. It is easy to understand why greater uncertainty would lead to overestimate, but I find it hard to see why more information should lead to underestimate.

6. The lesson to be drawn from this record is fairly clear. Assumptions about the behavior of the Soviet Union, whether explicit or implicit, require the closest examination if persistent biases are to be avoided in the future.



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